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Banaras Glass Beads: A case study in the Globalization of Indian Art

Nair Sreejesh S[a], Sah Rakesh[b]*

[a] *Department of Design, IIT, Roorkee*
[b] *School of Design, UPES, Dehradun*
[a]*Email: nagpalmannat363@gmail.com*

Abstract

Banaras glass beads demonstrate the transformation of a localized Indian craft through global cultural and economic exchanges. The tradition of India's bead making dates back to the Indus Valley Civilization, which evolved with the adoption of Czech lamp-winding technique. With active engagement with international markets, Banaras beads are used as components for imitation jewelry and decorative art, and is exported globally, a journey from being a local ritual adornment to an international commodity.

From raw material procurement to production, along with stringing, polishing and order fulfillment, this study documents the end-to-end lifecycle of the craft. An ethnographic study conducted during the documentation reveals that the artisans are caught between heritage and market pressure. While globalization brings along economic opportunities, it also introduces vulnerabilities, along with stiff competition from Chinese mass-produced beads, erosion of traditional knowledge occurs.

This paper highlights how these cultural products migrate beyond their original socio-religious contexts, giving new forms of value while challenging sustainability. A strategic intervention in skill preservation, branding and global cultural exchange is essential to safeguard India's craft heritage in a competitive international market.

Keywords: Banaras Glass Beads, Globalization, Indian Crafts, Cultural Trade, Heritage Economy.

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* Corresponding author.

Introduction

One of the world's oldest living cities, Banaras, stands at the center of the vibrant Indian art and culture. From the Lion Capital on the Ashoka Pillar at Sarnath to the stupa of Lord Buddha, from terracotta sculptures to the unearthed ancient toys at Rajghat, it is a living museum. Banaras is the home to the master craftsmen of the famous Banaras saree weavers, brass and metal work, jewelry making, terracotta art, wooden toy making, stone carving and more such crafts.Recognized nationally, these crafts have also earned appreciation from India's Prime Minister, Shri Narendra Modi. Among these distinguished crafts, Banaras glass beads hold a unique place in the culture of Banaras, blending aesthetics and functionality, reflecting a transgenerational skill acquired over decades, shaping local identity and global appreciation. With the onset of globalization, this traditional craft stands at the crossroads – international visibility and new market expansion, yet remains challenged by mass production, cultural dilution and changing user preferences. This study explores the journey of Banaras glass beads with the backdrop of global context, how the craft adapts, survives and thrives in this interconnected world trade while still

retaining its culture.

Literature Review

Glass Beads History in India A range of different kinds of beads can be found from hand-carved wooden beads to tiny glass seed ones, the traditional beads found in India cover a wide range of styles, materials and treatment processes. The bead art in India dates back to Indus valley civilization and is said to be 5000 years old. People during that period used to make beads out of silver, gold, clay, ivory and even wood. One of the major bead producers in the world is India. The Indians learned the technique of glass bead manufacture, probably independently, only around 1200 B.C. Since then, evidence of glass has been unearthed from more than 200 ancient Indian sites. The beads made in Varanasi are exported in huge quantities throughout the world. The glass beads used today were not found in India until 1700 and were available only in the kingdom of Saurashtra (now southern Gujarat state). With new and advanced sets of tools and machinery in the modern industry, the artisans have created more variations of beads with vast colors and imaginative work.

History of Banaras Beads

The inspiration of bead jewelry came from the traditional jewelry which was worn by people and animals in South Africa. Earlier the bead used around the world was mostly made of wood, bones, stones and metal. Glass beads were first introduced in Czech Republic. The craft of glass beads has been practiced in India for 1000-1500 years. Earlier people followed the traditional methods which was by using a furnace commonly known as Bhatti, started in Purdilnagar near Aligarh but later in the 1940's a couple from Czech Republic had visited the Banaras Hindu University and they gave training of making the glass beads through lamp work process to 17 people in Varanasi. The glass beads were commercialized with the establishment of Banaras Beads Ltd. (BBL) by Shri Kanhaiya Lal Gupta n the 1940s to grow the production and profit. The BBL factory became a major source of employment - just skill and experience, no formal education required.

Traditionally used in ritual offerings, festival adornments, and as jewelry, reflecting the relationship between material culture and social life. The older generation passed on the skills and across the newer generation, reinforcing the craft as an intangible cultural heritage. (Panicker, John, & Chandrasekharan, 2024)

The Making Process

The art of glass bead making is among the oldest human arts, which dates back to 3,000 years ago. Glass melts at 600-800 degrees Celsius, and compared to metal it is very difficult to work with. It is much softer when it is hot but when it cools down, it becomes harder than metal. The nature of glass is to become round. different glass types and different colors melt at different temperatures. Some colors rise to the surface of the glass beads. Well others sink to the bottom towards the core of the bead. The process of making glass beads includes various steps like, getting the raw materials, tools, various techniques used to make the beads, segregation, washing and packaging of the glass beads. Banaras Beads Pvt. Ltd. produces two types of beads. Handmade and Machine-made beads. These two categories have different types further. Hand-Made Beads: amp Work and Machine-Made Beads: Pressed/Molded Beads, Faceted Beads and Tube Cutting Beads.

Globalization has changed the way we make crafts, including Banaras glass beads. Once upon a time, the beads that used to be local for rituals and domestic use, now travels across the globe serving as components of imitation jewelry, fashion accessories, and décor items. The globalization brings new economic opportunities, but also challenges of stiff competition from Chinese mass-produced beads and the erosion of traditional designs (Kanungo, 2004)

Methodology

The study follows a qualitative, ethnographic research through craft documentation and stakeholder interviews to

examine the Banaras glass bead industry in the context of globalization of Indian art.

Field Observation and Craft Documentation

For primary data collection, the team went for site visits in Banaras and Purdalpur, and the near by villages of Kesharipur, Kapar Phorwa and Bhaupur. The documentation of the entire bead making process was done through photography and sketch noting. The end-to-end process includes:

1. Raw Material Preparation: Cutting and preparing the required glass rods and tubes as per the designs selected.

2. Winding and Molding: There are two methods of winding common in India, lamp winding - heating glass rods and tubes over kerosene or gas torches to form beads, and furnace winding – creating multiple beads in bulk using furnace.

3. Segregation, Washing and Polishing: The beads are then segregated based on their size. After segregation, the beads ware washed for removing any impurities such as dust particles before sending it for polishing and applying the final finish as per the requirement.

4. Stringing: Preparing the beads in the desired jewelry form to be market ready.

5. Assembly and Packaging: The glass beads are finally packed according to the client's needs. Beads are packed in different ways ranging from string to boxes full of beads and sometimes also by weight. Here we capture the technical details of the bead making process, labor division and how demands for exports shape the type of tools and process used changes under market pressures.

Stakeholder Interviews

To understand the true experiences of the stakeholders involved in the glass beads process, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the stakeholders at every stage of the bead making process. These interviews not only uncovered the technical aspects of bead making, but also the socio-economic factors and emotional impact of a craft impacted by the globalization of Indian art.

Contemporary Practice and Innovation

The process of glass beads currently retains its traditional core of making beads, while also incorporating technological innovations to keep competing in the international market and keep up with the demand.

Step-by-Step Process

Raw Material

Primarily sourced from Firozabad, China and Italy, glass canes are the raw material for glass beads.

Winding and Molding

There are traditional and modern techniques for crafting glass beads, the two common traditional methods are lamp winding and furnace winding.

 In lamp winding, the artisan melts the glass cane over a flame and winds them onto a manderal, then shaped

using tools like chimta and kahari.

 In furnace winding, a manderal is dipped into the molten glass and shaped while its hot. It is considered as the oldest technique of winding beads.

Beads made using both the methods yield unique internal features. Advanced techniques using machines for molding, faceting, or cutting glass rods with high precision produces pressed, faceted and tube-cut glass beads. Other high-end beads like appliqué and dichoric glass beads are also made using advanced techniques and materials to create unique patterns and finishes.

While modern innovations have allowed for mass production leading to an economic boom for the industry, but the artisanal skills are being lost in the globalization of the process, with only few artisans from the older generation remaining to practice these methods.

Segregation

The segregation of glass beads happens through an automatic pentagon machine that separates the dust and waste at a fixed speed of 60 rpm, and processes about 25kg/hour of glass beads. Any remaining impurities are removed by hand, before the cleaned beads are dried on long cloth sheets.

Washing

The glass beads in bulk are thoroughly washed in wooden rotary machines. They are round wooden drums like structures. Chromium oxide and Sulphuric acid are added to the machine.

This machine functions continuously for 72 hours for the process of polishing is complete.

Polishing

To enhance the color and finish, beads undergo various polishing techniques:

 AB Polishing, employs vacuum machines to polish the glass beads using gases like carbon (silver), nitrogen (gold), oxygen (rainbow), etc.

 Pearl Polishing, involves dipping the beads in a lacquer and the choice of color, and later hanging them to dry.

 Heat Belt Polishing, melts the beads at high temperatures (530-600 O C) to fill the cracks and create a smooth surface finish.

 Drum Polishing, uses emery powder, sulphuric and nitric acid, to smoothen the beads by rotating it inside drums for 48-72 hours.

Different type of beads is polished using different methods, each serve a different purpose. Stringing After the polishing is completed, the beads go into the final stage of the craft process before it is ready to go to the market. The stringing of beads is typically done by the women of the villages and it can be a simple threading or a complex multi-strand or knotted design. Beads can be sold as both strung or unstrung (unstrung batch contains waste like broken or unperforated beads).

Knot, a common waste product, caused by foreign material blocking the bead interiors can be found at every stage

of the process.

Packaging

The packaging of beads is done as per the requirement of the clients – it can be packed by strings, boxes or by weight. The beads are first weighed, placed in clear plastic bags, and labeled with the product details and stickers of the company.

Innovation and Adaptation

 To meet the needs of the international fashion and jewelry market, the color and form of the beads has been diversified.

 Mechanization in the bead cutting and polishing process brings consistency in the beads for bulk export, driving the cost of manufacturing down and being able to demand a higher price in the international market due to consistent quality.

 Beyond jewelry, product lines have expanded to decorative items and accessories, to survive the global market pressures (Panicker et al., 2024)

Globalization, Market and Cultural Modernity

Globalization positioned Banaras glass beads beyond the local rituals, making it a part of the global fashion and art industry. The following cases portrays the journey of global commodity from a local tradition.

 Export Markets: A significant part of the bead production in Banaras is exported, particularly Africa, Europe, and the US for imitation jewelry and decorative arts.

 Market Pressures: Immense competition from Chinese mass-produced beads (cheaper and standardized), makes the local artisans to undercut prices to stay in the market.

 Cultural Transformation: Once upon a time, beads used to be a cultural artifact, now a global consumer trend commodity.

 Modernization v/s Heritage: The dual nature of the art can be seen in a global context where artisans try to balance traditional techniques with market-driven innovation (Gautam, 2017).

Challenges and Threats

The Banaras glass beads industry exhibits multiple challenges for the sustainability of the craft, as only a last few practicing families are left in and around Banaras.

 Declining Artisan Participation: The younger generation wants to have a better career path and trajectory, hence reluctant to continue this low earning and unstable bead market.

 Economic Exploitation: The middle man, between the artisan and the buyer, captures a significant portion of the profits, leaving certain artisan with just enough income to be able to survive, hand-to-mouth.

 Cultural Dilution: Due to globalization, the focus has been shifted to mass production, which further reduces

the focus on heritage aesthetics, risking the loss of traditional design and symbolism.

Strategies for Revitalization

- Product Diversification and Design Innovation: Inspired by heritage motifs, introduce contemporary jewelry, décor, fashion products, etc.

- Digital Storytelling and E-commerce: To reduce the dependency of the middle man, promoting artisans via social media, e-commerce and quick commerce. Sah, R., & Chowdhury, A. (2024).

- Cultural Tourism and Exhibitions: To attract tourists and global buyers, Banaras glass beads need to be positioned as a living craft hub.

- Youth Engagement: To encourage generational continuity, government should introduce new age training programs and workshops to increase awareness and increase younger generation's participation.

Conclusion

The transformation of a traditional Indian craft to a global product is reflected through Banaras glass beads. This study reveals its rich legacy of skill, community involvement, and cultural significance. However, the globalization of Indian art and craft has brough both opportunities and challenges – expanding market provides economic boom and access to international markets, while questioning a concern for the authenticity, fair wages and generational continuity.

In order to sustain the craft, design interventions are needed for design innovation, market access, digital presence and youth engagement. With the right kind of support, the Banaras Glass Beads can thrive in the global economy as both heritage and contemporary.

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